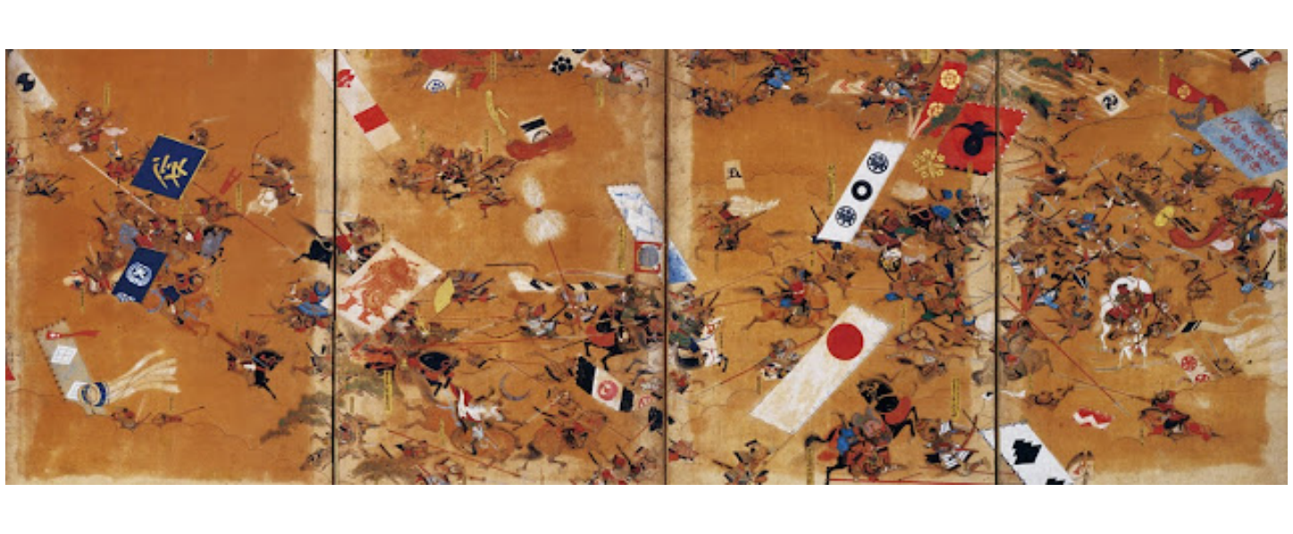
Sengoku Period Warfare: Part 2 - Cavalry Tactics

May 16, 2018

Sengoku Period Warfare: Part 2 - Cavalry Tactics



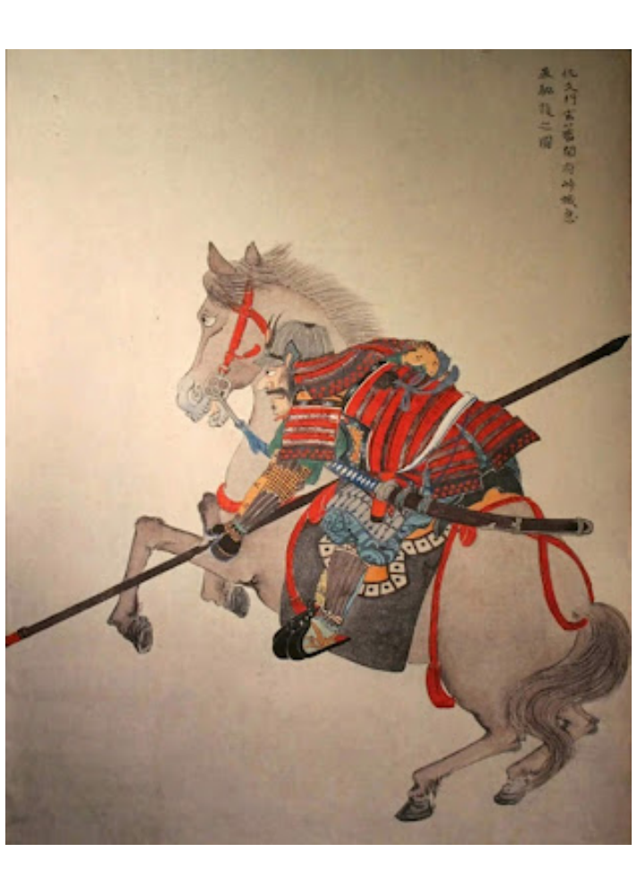
A cluster of horsemen wielding various polearms, taken from **姉川合戦図屏風**

After having explained how **late Sengoku armies** were mustered and how they approached the battle with different formations **in the first part of this series**, today I will cover one of the main role of the *bushi* in this period: **Samurai cavalry.**

Since there are different theories about the actual use of war horses in Japan, this article will be released with a **twin article** which clarify few points on **Japanese cavalry itself**, while this one will be entirely dedicated to cavalry tactics as the name suggested it.
If you haven't read it, it is highly recommended to do so before reading this one:

Did Cavalry Existed in Japan?

The role of the cavalry troops - Kiba Tai (騎馬隊)



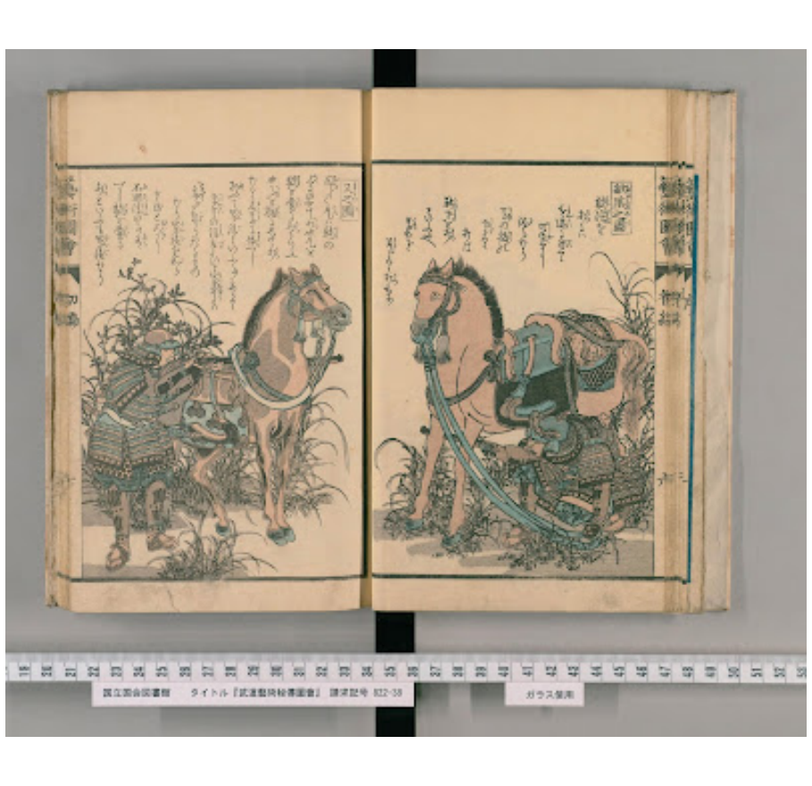
Sakuma Morimasa **(佐久間 守正)** *depicted on horseback, wielding a spear.*

During the Sengoku period, cavalry had lost their hegemony of the field of battle in favor of **mass infantry focused** armies for a very simple reason; they were cheaper and if properly trained, they could fight extremely effectively.
From the **Nanbokucho period** onward, the Samurai who usually fought on horseback with their bows, started to use various polearms to deal better against infantries groups that started to be more cohesive and less scattered.
At the beginning of the warring state period, the bow was completely replaced by the spear.

Depending on the various clans of this period, the Samurai that brought horses to battle fought in very different ways.
There was a **clear distinction** between the horsemen in the western Japan and the ones in the east.
In fact, as I have written in my other articles, there wasn't a strong tradition of horsemanship in **Kyūshū (and throughout Japan in genereal)** compared to the one in the North East of **Honshū.**
This is justified by geography, since the Kantō plains were located in the north east while Kyūshū was predominately **mountainous**, and is also confirmed by **army reports**; the **Hōjō** which own those plains made their armies with as much as **27% of cavalry troops**, while the **Shimazu** often used less than **15% of mounted troops.**

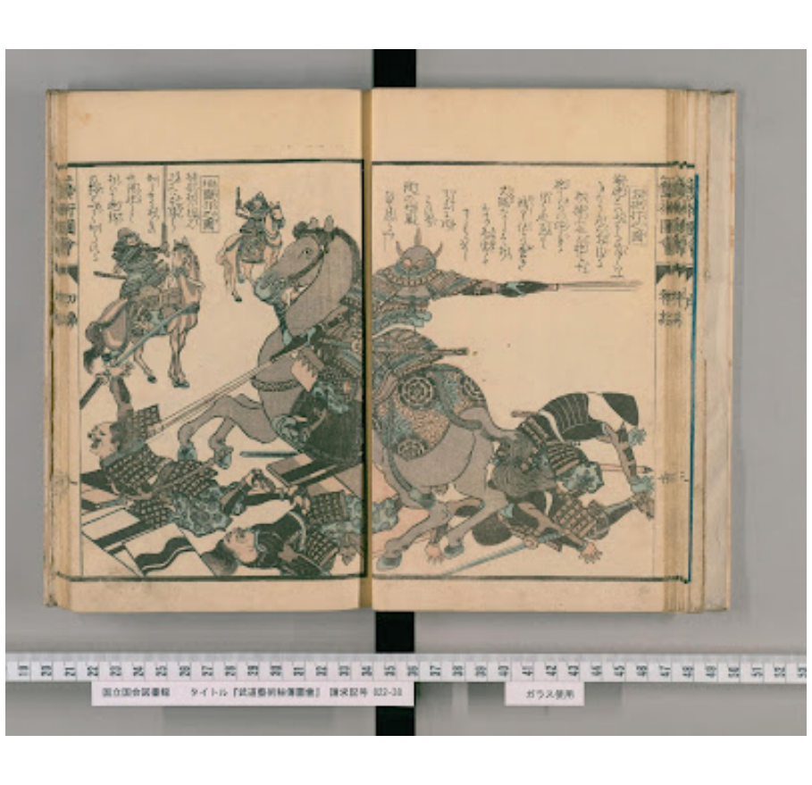
According to the **clan**, the **terrain** and the **situation of the battle**, the mounted Samurai could be used as different types of cavalry;

- ***Mounted Infantry:*** This is by far the most prevalent role of mounted Samurai throughout all Japan given the two different traditions. They used their horses to move from one place from another and then **dismount to fight** either with polearms or swords, but also with firearms and bows as well.



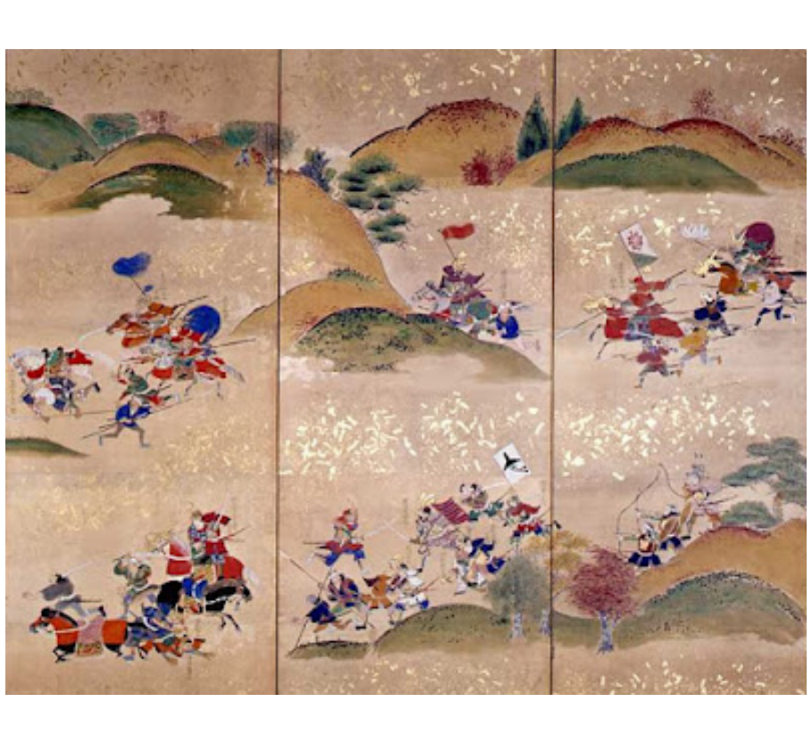
An example of a "mounted infantry" fighting as ***dragoon****, from* **武道藝術秘傳圖會. [1]**

- ***Medium Cavalry:*** When the terrain was suited for horse fighting, the Samurai performed as medium cavalry; they **scout**, **raid** and **skirmish** across the battlefield, **pursuit** retreating enemies and where used to **flank** enemy lines.
  They mostly used spears, although firearms were used as well by the Date and the Kato clan; mounted troops carried a *carabine* called **Bajōzutsu (馬上筒)**, shorter than a normal **teppō.** Given the fact that they still worn heavy armor, they should be classified more like "medium" rather than light cavalry.



A Samurai shooting with his ***bajōzutsu****, from* **武道藝術秘傳圖會. [1]**

- ***Heavy Cavalry:*** This kind of role was only reserved to the eastern Samurai like the one serving in the Takeda. They were used to **charge** directly or behind enemy lines and **counter other cavalry** troops as well. Sometimes their horses were armored and they used firearms like the bajozutsu but most commonly spears.
  The spear was held with two hands to give a stronger impact and the horse was controlled with both legs; this is the same technique used to perform horseback archery.



Some groups of heavy armored cavalry samurai charging into battle, from **長谷堂合戦図屏風**

The cavalry troops, being Samurai, had **personal retainers** that stayed closer to them in the Sonae, carried their weaponry and worked as support units, much like an European squire. They also joined the fight whenever possible (especially in the **mounted infantry** scenario) and were often responsible of **taking heads** for their lords.
These foot Samurai were also used as **heavy infantry or archers** to support the ashigaru lines.

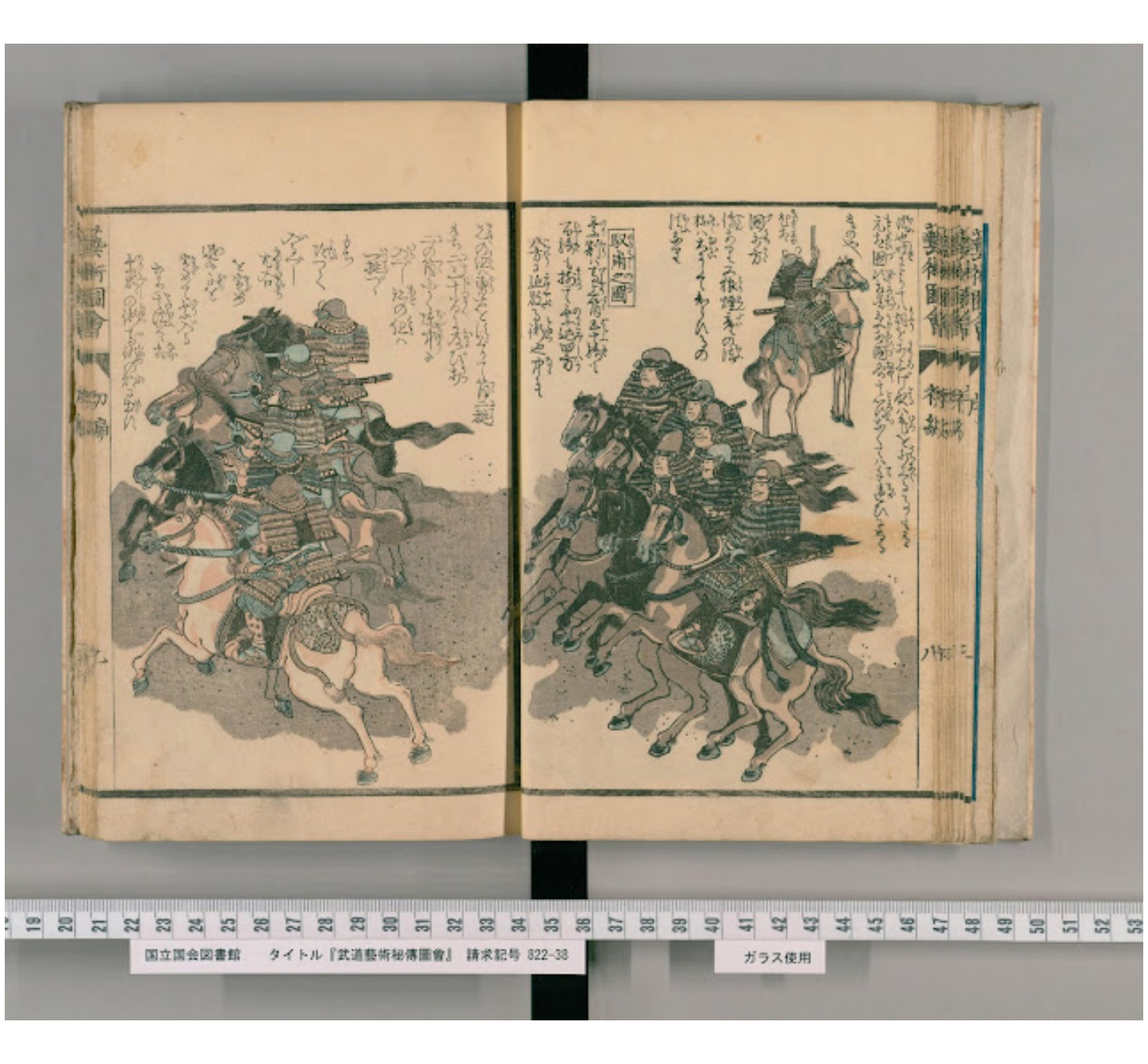
Tactics

Given the fact that the Samurai could directly dismount and operate as infantry, there were some specific tactics for horsemen.
Cavalry in general was **only used after the battle was already started**, either to deliver a decisive victory or to trying to save the day.

Norikiri **- 乗り切り:**
This is a classic charge, where **several small groups** of five to ten horseman ride consequently (possibly with a **wedge formation**) into a **small area against the enemy lines**, to maximize the shock. It was mainly used by heavy cavalry in the East, but given the fact that the ideal target where **"weavering" units** with low morale or disorganized, even medium cavalry could perform this charge.
The main role of this charge was to create confusion; if it didn't succeed, the cavalry regroups and either retreat or deliver another charge.

Norikuzushi **- 乗り崩し:**
This is a **combined infantry and cavalry charge**. The horseman charged first, and after creating mayhem, a second charge is delivered by infantries armed with polearms, which could keep on fighting. The main target for this tactics were ranged units detached by the army. After a Norikuzushi usually follows a Norikiri by the cavalry group.

Norikomi **- 乗り込み:**
There are many variations of this tactic across different sources; usually it is a **hit and run** charge delivered by horseman against an enemy sonae that wasn't already in formation; the idea is to create confusion and avoid the ranks to be properly formed. In this case the use of fire arms and missile weapons was highly useful.



Cavalry corps from **武道藝術秘傳圖會. [1]**

Other than this tactics, if the Sonae break against the enemy, the Samurai were ordered to dismount and give support, or in the case a group of cavalry performed a charge, trying to counter charge them.
The mounted troops were also ordered to pursuit the enemy, ambush or block the main ways of escape from the battlefield as I have already writte

I hope this article would have been useful & interesting; if you liked please feel free to share it or leave a comment below!

The third part of this series is available **here.**

Gunbai

General History Tactics

春秋戰國 *18 May 2018 at 18:55*

Nice article as always!

I do wonder about the scale of Samurai cavalry warfare though - how many cavalry did they field usually?

Gunsen History *19 May 2018 at 04:57*

Thank you!
That's an interesting question! It really depends on the clan, but even speaking about the Kanto ones, is not easy to pinpoint a precise number; from the Takeda Chronicles we know that the full stack of cavalry in the whole army was around 9121 and that at Mikatagahara the Takeda army deployed at least 1470 horsemen (without counting the personal mounted troops of Shingen that may have been 1000 men alone).
At Nagashino, some sources claimed that the number of Takeda mounted troops was around 2000 - 5000 men but it is very hard to verify it, since it is hard to establish the troops numbers in the first place.

The Hojo had at least 10 000 horsemen in his whole army, though is hard to see all of them in one single place. For example, Obata Gengoro alone was able to field 500 horsemen in his sonae, which was supposed to join other sonae.
Hope that this could give you a better idea!

REPLY

The GhostHero *19 May 2018 at 11:26*

Hello very good post as always.
I have a question to ask to someone, and I figured out you were the most qualified to answer it. My question is what is the earliest evidence of steel armor outside of the kabuto? Was it in the muramachi period or before? Was it a domaru with steel plates or was it the torso gusoku?

Gunsen History *20 May 2018 at 06:01*

Thank you!

Well I want to be humble, but for any questions about armors you can ask me, honestly is the "field" I know the most!

I don't think that I've fully understood your question; if you mean "steel" armor as a material opposed to iron, well I don't have specific data about the carbon content found in the earliest armor, but I can give you an educated guess:
With the earliest smelting process, pure iron (with 0% carbon) was never obtained. However, a very low carbon steel with a carbon content of 0.08%-0.25% was easily obtained and used for armors as well. This is usually called "Wrought Iron" and has similar properties of mild steel. It might be that some armor had even High Carbon steel kozane in the early periods, but I think that you won't find a lot of these suits prior to the 14th century. This is the period in which Dou maru (made with less kozane) started to be prevalent and since they required less lamellae, more high quality lamellae could be used; but this is a guess of mine!

If you mean steel solid armor as opposed to a flexible lamellar structure (like your example of the Kabuto), the first evidence of solid, riveted lames/plates made of steel/iron is found inside the Taiheiki of the 14th century. Here there is a mention of two types of armor, called Kanadou (金胴) or Karadou (空胴). They mean "iron cuirass" or "empty cuirass", two names that suggest the all metal structure without any type of laces (empty). These are supposed to be the precursor of the Okegawa Dou.

The GhostHero *20 May 2018 at 10:11*

Thanks you you indeed understood my question correctly

REPLY

That guy *2 December 2018 at 11:30*

Do you have any further information on firearms from horseback? This ritter type thing I would like to know about.

Gunsen History *3 December 2018 at 09:54*

Yes, sure! These weapons are called Bajōzutsu (馬上筒) and were essentially shortened teppo like carbines. They were holstered on the horse, near the saddle, by the Samurai:
(you can see it in this picture, the gun is in between the horse's neck and the saddle).

https://i.pinimg.com/originals/3b/c9/15/3bc9157b60dce7f007137f48d6a99003.jpg

We do not know how many Samurai chose to carry one of this in battle, they usually prefered to have a longer arquebus carried by one of their retainers if needed. However it is said that the Date used a cavalry troops all equipped with said weapon, called "kiba teppo tai" (騎馬鉄砲隊) during the Summer Campaign of Osaka in the 1615, but there are no official records about that.

There are also some manuals that deal with shooting while on horseback:

https://img01.militaryblog.jp/usr/g/e/r/gerira13/kibateppoutai.jpg

The manual I mentioned in the article called 武道藝術秘傳圖會 is another example.
It is likely that if these weapons were actually used, the mounted Samurai either reach a point, dismounted, shoot and then came back to their line or reach a point, stop the horses, shot while on the saddle and came back.
It is still disputed wether or not these weapons were used, but there are plenty of examples and the name means "horse gun" more or less. Not to mention that there is another type of short fire arm which is more similar to a handgun, which is called "tan tsutsu" (短筒) and is even shorter.

However it is also true that shooting while on horseback and riding is very hard, you lose accuracy and you cannot reload properly. So if it is used while riding, you lose almost entirely the benefits of the gun, and you need to be very close to deal damage; at this point, it is better to use a spear.

That guy *4 December 2018 at 19:59*

Thanks for the extra information on them. They seem to have been a rare phenomenon. You mentioned samurai preferring a longer arquebus from one of their retainers, was this for the purpose of sniping/skirmishing? How accurate was such fire, given that I assume they wouldn't be moving on horseback while firing a long gun.

Gunsen History *5 December 2018 at 03:55*

You're welcome!
While I don't have data on the accuracy, Japanese fierarms of the period were quite accurate and they were also used to hunt too, so I suspect that at least within the 100 m they would have been quite reliable; but again I haven't done a big amount of research on this topic so take it with a pinch of salt.

Usually the longer/bigger guns were operated by the Samurai; the majority of them all over Japan fought on foot, and acted as spearmen/archers/gunners if needed. They were like the jack of all trade of the situation.

So if they were supposed to fight on foot, like in a siege, these warriors opted for a longer fire arms rather than the shorter bajozutsu, which was usually for mounted troops.
So these shorter firearms were used by mounted troops for skirmishes.

REPLY

Unknown *12 March 2019 at 03:57*

Sorry, but may I have the sources you used to write this article - particularly the primary sources? I think it's very informative and I'm very appreciative of the easily - digestible work. Thanks!

Gunsen History *12 March 2019 at 06:53*

Thank you!

For this article I have mainly used the Kōyōgunkan (甲陽軍鑑), the Shinchō kōki (信長公記) and the Zōyōmonogatari (雑兵物語).
I have also used the Budō geijutsu hiden zue (武道藝術秘傳圖會) and for English sources " Weapons & Fighting Techniques of the Samurai Warrior 1200-1877 AD [Thomas D. Conlan]".
I've also used the nomenclature used by Turnbull in his "War in Japan 1467-1615" for the tactics because it was also used by several other Japanese books as well as the kotobank dictionary (whenever there is Turnbull involved, I use extra care and double or triple check his "claims").
Those terms are also used in the aforementioned sources.

REPLY

Enter comment

Popular posts from this blog

Masakari (鉞) - The Samurai's War Axe
September 30, 2017

Masakari (鉞) - The Samurai's War Axe Samurai holding a battle axe; detail from the 春日権現験記. 第８軸 Also know as Ono (斧) or as Fuetsu (斧鉞), this weapon is one of the less related within the "Samurai warfare" context. For many years inside the internet I've read a lot of stuffs about the fact that Samurai didn't use Axes in …

READ MORE

Tate & Tedate (盾 & 手盾) - Japanese Shields
December 18, 2017

Tate & Tedate (盾 & 手盾) - Japanese Shields A samurai carrying a Tate type of shield converted into a Tedate and a Nagamaki, " 石山寺縁起絵巻 ", 13th century Japanese shields are a really interesting topic to study, and an highly misunderstood one, especially inside the "pop culture". It is in fact quite common to read or hear the …

READ MORE

Yumi (弓) - The Japanese Bow
July 12, 2017

Wakyuu (和弓) - The Japanese Bow DISCLAIMER: Since the article is longer than the expectations, here is a little Index: - History : Different bows structure and composition from the Yayoi to the Edo Period - The asymmetry, length and draw techniques explained - Power and range : Draw weight estimation, maximum range …

READ MORE

Sengoku Period Warfare: Part 1 - Army and Battle Formations
March 18, 2018

Sengoku Period Warfare: Part 1 - Army and Formations A detail from 関ヶ原合戦屏風 , late 19th century. The Sengoku period (戦国時代) is generally speaking the most interesting, intense and famous period of Japanese history. We are all familiar with the classic picture of the Ashigaru arquebusiers formation, or with the fierce …

READ MORE

Tosei Gusoku (当世具足) - Body Coverage Explained
October 22, 2017

Japanese Armor Body Coverage Explained Warriors of the Takeda Clan donning their armor, Utagawa Sadahide (歌川 貞秀) - 武田勇士揃 As I said before in a previous post, for any serious "Armor Enthusiast", there are some questions that suddenly come to mind when looking at a full harness. Last time I've covered the weight, …

READ MORE

Cagayan Battles of 1582: Debunking the Hoax
November 16, 2018

Cagayan Battles of 1582: Debunking the Hoax A picture taken from the Spanish comics "Las Espadas Del Fin Mundo" depicting the fictitious battle. Before starting to write anything about the Cagayan battle, I would like to make a premise: I'm not really a fan of the kind of debates you could find on the internet about hypothetical …

READ MORE

Wantō (湾刀): Early Curved Japanese Swords
February 26, 2020

Wantō (湾刀): Early Curved Japanese Swords A classic example of a curved warabitet ō, the most common style. If you have ever tried to approach the study of Japanese swords , you might have encountered the incredible amount of different theories and the huge (and occasionally hostile) nomenclature that pervade such field. In …

READ MORE